A few years ago, I came home in the evening and noticed a bird sitting on the upstairs railing of my front deck. I was baffled by the site and tried to identify it, but the sky was dark and my eyesight isn’t very good and so I crept ever so quietly closer and closer to get a better look. I didn’t want to scare the bird and tried to keep a good enough distance away and although I did get a few photos, they are dark and blurry, and I was never properly able to determine who visited the Bonnin casa that warm summer evening. My best guess though, based on the size, posture, and coloring (that which I could see anyways,) was a Common Poorwill, a nocturnal insect-eater. So the other day when my husband and I were talking to a neighbor who is a fellow birder and he told us about the Common Poorwill he had seen in our canyon, my ears perked up. Could it have been a Common Poorwill I saw those years back after all? Maybe yes. Maybe no, but later that evening John and I walked out onto our back deck and heard the distinctive call of this small, stocky nightjar. From All About Birds I learned that the haunting sound bouncing from the far end of the canyon was from a breeding male singing his repeated, whistled “poorwillip.” He called over and over and then it finally stopped. Hopefully his incessant attempt to find a mate was successful.

The Common Poorwill isn’t the only male bird looking for love. With spring, comes an increased fervor for many animals whose internal clocks are saying “time to party.” One day I watched a Wrentit singing from atop a Lemonade berry shrub. As he warbled his long tail (or hers, since both male and female Wrentits sing throughout the year and are particularly loud and vocal during the breeding season,) shook and wobbled with each note. Wrentits are small birds with long legs whose tail is often held erect away from the body. Seeing a Wrentit perched up high with the tail cocked up to the sky is not uncommon in the park, but hearing the “song of the chaparral” is even more familiar since these chunky birds more often sing from deep inside shrubs where they spend their time foraging and singing hidden from view. They pick insects, seeds, and fruits from twigs and branches and if they find larger prey, use their feet like hands to hold the insect still while they eat it. According to All About Birds, “Wrentits mate for life and form pair bonds as early as 30 to 40 days old. Pairs are solitary, but form family flocks for up to 41 days after nestlings leave the nest. Males and females defend territories year-round and tend to stay in the same vicinity throughout their life.” The bird activity in the park is bustling in these early days of spring. You can check them out with docent Tom Eastman on our monthly bird walk, Saturday, April 30 at 8am.

One late afternoon Alex and I were working in the office when we heard a crash at the glass door. Intuitively, we both knew a bird must have crashed into the window and we rushed to see what happened. Sadly, a beautiful Hermit Thrush was lying face up on the deck and we were horrified. For birds, glass windows are invisible and with the reflection of trees, berries, and other vegetation may actually look inviting. I suspect the Hermit Thrush saw the Toyon that sits in the little island outside our office reflected in the glass and since it still had ripe red berries covering it, thought it could find a snack. Through my research, I found that up to one billion birds die each year from colliding with glass panes in windows and doors, including those on vehicles. Sometimes the bird seems to survive the strike as they manage to fly away after being temporarily stunned. What we don’t see after the fact though is that many times these birds die later from internal bleeding or bruising, especially on the brain. This is a heartbreaking statistic, and
while our Hermit Thrush did eventually fly off and disappear, we can only hope that it survived, without injuries, to fly another day. For more information about preventing these bird crashes click here.

Birds aren’t the only living creatures we see in the park. At a recent training with the Natural Resources Management team on identifying and tracking invasive plant populations we stumbled upon a natural history spectacle. We were in the open space near the Ranger Station and spotted what I thought was a worm burying itself in the soil. Turns out the worm was actually the recently dropped tail from a Belding’s Orange-throated Whiptail, a species of local lizard. It clearly had just occurred as the tail was madly shaking and wiggling in a frantic sort of dance. Tail loss, otherwise referred to as tail-autonomy, caudal autonomy, or tail shedding is a brilliant defense mechanism that allows the lizard to escape from a predator. Once the tail is dropped, it continues to thrash around like a living creature, since nerves from the lizard’s body are still firing and communicating with each other, which distracts the predator away from the live lizard. While the predator is attacking the lifeless tail (which stores fat and thus may be an edible food source after all), the wounded lizard “runs” for cover. Losing the tail does not seriously harm a lizard, and may actually save its life, but the loss of a tail might have some negative effects besides a loss of stored energy. A stump of a tail may impair the lizard’s ability to run quickly or balance itself while climbing, and a tailless male lizard may not appear nearly as fetching to a female thus hindering his chances for finding a mate at breeding time. When the lizard’s tail grows back, it’s a bit different than it was before. Instead of a tail made of bone, the new tail is often composed of cartilage and can break off again (either voluntarily, which takes a lot of energy, or from being tugged on by a hungry predator). I must admit seeing this “self-amputation” was an impressive visual experience, but I sure hope we weren’t the potential predators that caused the whiptail such stress.

It seems that with each foray into the park these days I see something out of the ordinary. Today it was a baby California Kingsnake on the Los Trancos path. These non-venomous reptiles found throughout the state come in more than 30 “prominent aberrant color patterns.” The most common pattern type we generally see may be the banded form, but that morning, our little guy was a beautiful striped morph. The week before it was a Western Spiny Brittle Star in the Rocky Bight tidepools gracefully sliding along the sand out from under a pile of seaweed. These delicate sea stars anchor themselves with spines of one or more arms then extend their other arms into the water to find food using a sticky mucus secretion. Brittle stars are primarily detritivores, filter feeding on decaying matter and plankton. They have long, thorny spines around their fuzzy looking disk and fortunately for them, can regenerate their fragile arms. That same day I saw two Spanish Shawl Nudibranchs (aka slugs) and two Hopkins Rose Nudibranchs alongside a handful of Ocher Sea Stars and two tiny California Sea Hares. That was one remarkable day of tidepool exploration! A week prior I saw an organism I had never seen in the tidepools which, according to docent and marine biologist Tim Arehart was a type of Broken Back Shrimp, so named because of the sharp angle of the attachment of the tail to the body. I saw two of these unusual organisms in the Pelican Point pools and although I have scanned the internet and my marine library, I can’t find anything else out about these cleaner shrimps. I don’t know if they are regular visitors, only passing through in the spring, or generally visible during the day or at night. So exciting to find new species, or maybe just in my case, never before seen, in the tidepools at Crystal Cove State Park. Finally, although I did not observe...
this one, a Mola Mola, aka Ocean Sunfish, washed ashore on the beach. This prehistoric looking fish has no tail and tiny pectoral fins and can weigh more than a car. Apparently, they are incredibly fertile and can lay up to 300,000 eggs at one time, more than any other vertebrate. They are deep-diving fish who bask in the sun when they return to the surface of the water. Not sure why this Mola Mola washed up on our beach, but for those who saw it, I am sure it was a fascinating find.

It has been over a month now since the Emerald wildfire destroyed some of the pristine coastal sage scrub on Moro Ridge. One of the things I noticed when I explored the fire area was the number of Common Ravens perched on bare burnt ground, or on scarred shrubs. It was a bit of an ominous feeling with dozens of ravens “patrolling” the site. I wondered what they were doing especially since ravens are not very social birds, but instead tend to be alone or in pairs, EXCEPT, at food sources. So, Common Ravens, although maybe technically not considered scavengers, will eat just about anything including dead things, small animals, other birds, eggs, insects, baby tortoises, fish, and of course, garbage. Perhaps the reason for their prolific existence was because without the regular vegetation small animals had fewer hiding places and were more exposed. Or maybe because after the fire several trails were closed, they were relishing the quiet, human-free site. Today all trails in the backcountry have reopened, but visitors are urged to stay on the trail to protect the habitat and stay out of burned areas to avoid further natural resource damage.

Judging by the sheer number of people visiting the park there’s no doubt that spring break, which lasts for about 6-weeks around these parts, has hit southern California. And why not? Who wouldn’t want to enjoy the beauty and warmth of this spectacular region? Those of us who live here are eternally fortunate for the bountiful signs of spring and renewal. As author Toni Sorenson wrote:

“Spring is painted in daffodil yellows, robin egg blues, new green grass, and the brightness of hope for a better life.”

See you in the Park!

Winter